

## December 17, 2009 - House Passes Defense Bill 395-30

The Hill

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By Roxana Tiron

December 17, 2009

The House on Wednesday passed a \$636.3 billion defense appropriations bill by a vote of 395-30, sending the must-pass spending measure to the Senate for a final vote.

The 2010 defense appropriations bill also carries the extension of several soon-to-expire policies, ranging from unemployment aid and healthcare benefits to the anti-terrorism law, known as the Patriot Act, and satellite TV carriers.

The massive Pentagon spending bill also contains \$128.3 billion in war funds. Rep. John Murtha (D-Pa.), the chairman of the House Appropriations Defense subcommittee, said he expects the war funding to run out next spring, forcing the Obama administration to ask Congress for the approval of emergency funding. President Barack Obama earlier this month announced plans to deploy 30,000 more U.S. troops to Afghanistan over the next several months to join the roughly 68,000 already there fighting an eight-year war.

Meanwhile, Obama is not expected to veto the defense-spending bill although it contains funding for programs that in past months attracted veto threats from cabinet officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

The defense-spending bill written by Congress ignores cuts to several high-profile Pentagon programs proposed by the Obama administration.

The bill includes \$465 million for the General Electric-Rolls-Royce alternative engine for the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and for 10 additional Boeing C-17 cargo planes. It also includes a lifeline of sorts for the VH-71 presidential helicopter, which the administration has canceled due to cost concerns.

The Pentagon did not ask for money to continue any of these programs.

Gates in October told Reps. John Murtha (D-Pa.) and Bill Young (R-Fla.), the chairman and ranking member of the House Appropriations Defense subcommittee, that he would recommend Obama veto the defense-spending bill if it included money for the VH-71 and if funds for the F-35 alternate engine threaten to “seriously” disrupt the overall fighter program.

Gates also told the Senate that he strongly opposed the \$2.5 billion for 10 additional C-17s. The House included three additional C-17s in its version of the bill, but negotiators agreed on 10 for the final bill — the number included in the original Senate version of the measure.

The defense bill has not escaped the eyes of budget watchdog organizations. The nonpartisan Taxpayers for Common Sense quickly tallied up the earmarks in the 2010 bill negotiated by the House and the Senate: 1,720 earmarks worth \$4.2 billion. That is 17 percent less in total and 14 percent less in value from last year, but still a “formidable number,” TCS’s Laura Peterson wrote in an email update.

As a backup measure lawmakers also crafted a stopgap measure to fund the Pentagon in case the president does not get the chance to sign the bill until the current continuing resolution runs out Dec. 18. The stopgap measure is also necessary because the Senate is mired in the healthcare reform debate. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) was expected to file for cloture to end debate on the defense bill.

“We of course hope that Republicans will cooperate and not delay legislation to provide funding to our troops and aid to the unemployed, but if they do not cooperate, it is likely we will file cloture. If we do have to do so, we hope to as early as today,” a Senate Democratic aide said Wednesday.

That means the Senate won’t get to vote on that bill until Friday unless senators from both parties agree to speed up the vote.

